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To Her whose sunny  
face and heart and soul  
have made brighter all  
that is mine, this little  
book.



# The Great Optimist

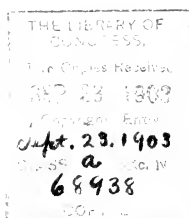
AND OTHER ESSAYS

BY

Leigh Mitchell Hodges  
"MITCHELL"



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[The Great Optimist-2]

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**AND** suddenly there  
was with the Angel  
a multitude of the  
Heavenly Host  
praising God and saying,  
Glory to God in the high-  
est and on earth peace,  
good will toward men.





# I

**I** SAT before the open fire last night—the eve of this high day—and half-way dreamed again The Story. Among the resting hills of old Judea were the flocks sleep-folded, and under the trees the shepherds guarded them. The little town of the House of Bread was sleeping, too, save in a stable, where a woman lay, and near her a strong man keeping watch. Away to the west Rome slumbered in her glory, and further on beyond the uncoursed seas the dream and hope of future times lay yet unknown. All was quiet and very peaceful in Bethlehem. Then came the first faint cry of one new-born, and that triumphant burst of song from out the skies, and the Wise Men bending low before the Manger, and then the long line of fruitful years which brings us to the present.

The lesson of that first Christmas needs no retelling, for it repeats itself on each successive dawning of the day. The story of how that Manger was the first throne of the King of Kings can be made no more impressive than is its own simple record. Nineteen centuries have

shown how it changed the whole course of human acts and thought; how it brought to men a new conception of life and recast their hopes and their being. Yet how many have ever thought of Him as the Great Optimist! How many realize that the song of the angels was in truth the divine prelude to Hope and Faith and Love—the things that have given us happiness!

It was He who made known to men that pain and want and suffering are but things of the moment—that beyond and above them are peace and joy and life. He it was who turned to the flowers of the field and the birds of the air, and drew from Nature the true lessons of living. From Him came the comforting truth that human fear is the foundation of human woe; that when we have conquered it we have gained the heights of mortal happiness. He it was who, through the most disappointing of human lives, with a cowshed for a cradle and Calvary for a shroud, still held to the better things, and saw through the night the glory of the noontide. If He could hope, on that black hill of the three crosses, what man among us has the right to despair?

The highest definition of optimism is hope. The highest hope possible is to be like Him. Consider His life, you who toil and drag and

suffer and are weary. No child so poor who was not fairer born than He. No man so low who is not better treated. Yet always of good cheer; always speaking words of comfort; ever loving, merciful and just, even to that most degrading of deaths. Can we wonder that the very stars of heaven joined in the chorus of that song? Can we wonder at the millions who have clung and are clinging to its far-borne echoes? Can we not do more? May we not on this, His natal day, set high our hopes anew, and rejoicing in Him and in them, put away the fears that have felled us? So long as this ball rolls on in its appointed place among the spheres it shall be the Star of Suffering. So long as winter doffs its white robe to show the gleam of summer's green, there shall be toil a-plenty, and strivings after lost things and wants and loves unsatisfied. But He had all of these to bear, and is it not a privilege that we may be like Him, if only in such wise?

The skies, the sun, and Nature to her smallest blade of grass are ever repeating that Life. There are clouds and cold winds, but ever and anon are the sunlight and the flowers. There are burdens and sorrows that weigh heavily and would seem to crush, but standing strong in the love of man and the trust of God

and the hope of a brighter day to come, we can, if we will, climb the long slope in the rarest of happiness, and rest in peace at evening. From out the stable of each life may issue the hopes and joys of Eternity.

We are human, and as such must we strive on, endeavoring each day to stand a little higher, a little more firmly. We must never lose hope. We must never despair. In the gloomiest hours we must have an ear to that best of the songs of earth, and a thought for that greatest of conquerings—the victory of the Child of Bethlehem.

Now, peace on earth, good will toward men,  
With joy, and faith, and love;  
That, though the way be rough and long,  
There still is Light above.



**or him who sings in  
the dark there is al-  
ways light,—he makes  
it, and none can shut  
it from him.**



## II

**D**O you know that some birds are taught to sing by having their cages darkened?

Then the little things long for the light, and in some way realize they must make a sound that the master of their light and darkness may hear, so they peep a faint note or two. These are always faint at first, but they are always rewarded with a brief space of sun. And at length the small songster comes to know that if it would live in light it must sing, and soon it finds that the faint notes have grown strong and clear, from the continued plea for deliverance, and finally its song is rare and beautiful and the master is willing it should have much light in return for a little singing.

Are not some of us birds caged in by the limitations of humanity? Is not that cage often darkened by sorrow and disappointment and seeming ill-fortune? Yet how is the Master to learn that we love the brighter, better things? Who but would sing *with* the sun!—but who sings *for* the sun shows clearly his love of it. And in the first note we attempt—be it ever so

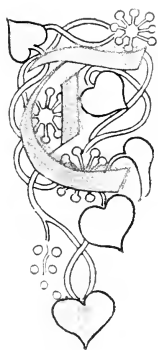
rude and weak, we gain an ear that is leaning to listen, and a hand that is always ready, lifts the shadow, at least for a little.

Like the bird, which after many days of darkness and many days of singing itself again into the light, finds its little voice grown strong and sure, we who sing on through our trials and burdening shall some morning find our own voices sweetened and greatedened from the long practice. The wavering note becomes steady; the harsh tone gently clear. Then do we know, O men and women, that the shadows of this world are sent but to train the weak voices and fit them for their places in the choir invisible,

"Of those immortal dead who live again  
In minds made better by their presence: live  
In pulses stirred to generosity,  
In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn  
For miserable aims that end with self,  
In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,  
And with their mild persistence urge man's search  
To vaster issues."

—*George Elliot.*





**HEY** form the perfect prelude to God's great cycle of song -- these first days of the earliest season.



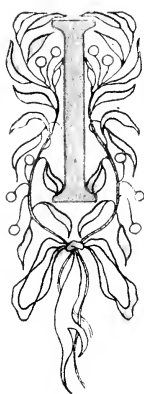
### III

**H**OW fine are these first spring-like days! The air fairly thrills with the promise of returning life, and the morning prophecy of the feathered wanderers that have come back sounds a cheery prelude to the day's work. Here and there along the open stretches are just the faintest touches of green—the starting strokes of a Master's brush, whose broad canvas shall so soon glow with the beauties of the wakened world. The day lengthens, as if it loved now to linger. The sun is up earlier each morning, that he may miss less and less of the marvelous transformation. And only man complains. "Spring-fever."

What a misnomer! Have tired heads and lazy legs and yawns aught to do with a realm springing into life and action! Is there not music everywhere to which he may time his steps and his labor? Has not the Old Mother, once again young, taken her seat at the organ—this great organ, with pipes reaching clear up to the sky and a hundred thousand stops? The south wind is turned on and the Vox Humana

pulled out. With a soft touch she tests the treble, and there comes the shrill note of a bird. Then another note is sounded and we have the blithe melody of the lark—not so clear and fine as it will be, for her fingers are a bit stiff as yet. And naturally—how could Nature be otherwise!—she tires after playing a few days, and there's a dull intermission of cloud and rain. But the rest shall only strengthen her, and some morning the great pipes, all agleam with gold, shall give forth the first glad movement of the long symphony, and a thousand stops will help swell the melody, and the flowers will lift their gay heads, and the trees burst into bud, and the concert of concerts begin.

Let us wake with the flowers and birds, the trees and streams. Let us open our ears and our hearts to the music that is everywhere. Let us lay aside our "winter garments of repentance" and be glad with the player of these sprightly measures.



**I** is not how much we have, but how we use it; and every man holds the possibilities of untold wealth within his own being.



## IV

**P**ERCHANCE you prefaced your breakfast this day with an apple—a shiny red one, maybe, or a yellow and juicy fellow. Did you simply pare and eat it, while chatting of the weather, or did you attend somewhat more carefully the piece of fruit? Saw you the symmetry of its form, the grace of its curves, the beauty and richness of its coloring? There were sculpture and painting! Did you smell of it before partaking? No perfume more gratifying! Did you notice how firm and fair was the interior, how curiously the whole was made? There was science, skill. And did you stop to think how but a little while gone, that tasty morsel was a small, frail flower on a slender twig; then a tiny hard knot of green, and at length a blushing boy of an apple? There was an Infinite Power! So you see how so small a thing as an apple and so common an act as the eating of it, may reveal much that is good and high.

It is a noble art, better worth cultivating than many a showier one, to make the most of

the things that are. The willingness and ability to get out of everything all the good that lies therein, and to apply it profitably is at once helpful and comforting. As with the eating of an apple, there is, in most of the seemingly ordinary happenings or duties of the day, sufficient of interest and pleasure to make much of little, or sometimes to cover up difficulties and drudgery.

This very willingness to accept what is, in its fulness, determines poverty and plenty more than do money and lands. It is the determination to derive from such as we have and can do all of beneficence in them, that fills our hearts and souls with a buoyant gratitude for the wealth of our blessings. In truth, it is the cheerful doing of the apparently insignificant tasks with the same enthusiasm which attends us 'in those of vaster moment, that brings to us a full return of peace. He who finds in an apple art, science, knowledge and religion is more to be envied than he who sees in a carving by Michaelangelo only the dollars and cents he paid therefor.





here can be no firm ground for any pessimist, so long as the American flag stands for the principles that gave it birth.



## V

THE sun was dropping behind a gray wall in the west-sky. Through a loop-hole in the cloud parapet, one gold gleam shot back into the world. As if trained on the very spot, and there alone, it lighted the folds of a flag floating high over the roofs and chimneys of the city. The red bars of it were made more red; the white ones took on the ruddy tinge of wounded day, and the stars shone pink against their field of blue—all purpled in that glow. And I thought, as I saw it thus blazoned against the dark sky, how much is wafted to us in the swaying of those stripes and stars!

It seemed a moment made for prayer. It was almost as if the hand of the Maker pointed a great gold finger at the emblem of His best gift—Freedom.

We men and women who toil and travail in the shadow of that waving—do we stop often enough to consider its meaning, its guarantee? Is it to many of us more than a bit of color swung to catch the breeze and fittingly finish

the end of a flagstaff? It must be, and far more. Next to the comforting consciousness of a Divine hand which guides and guards us, that flag should mean peace of mind and spirit. The wish has often come, and still remains, that every American boy be taught to bare his head to that standard, as to a woman. For the respect rightly paid her is a debt to Motherhood, and that Motherhood would count for little were it not extended and enlarged in the Motherhood of an upright nation!

From trials and hardships, it is well to look up sometimes to that piece of blood-baptized bunting, which daily unfolds its high message. It is well to read in those bars of crimson the story of lives laid down for rights and principles; in those alternate stripes of white, the lesson of peace. We see in that starred square the growing strength and increasing good of the nation. Bear all these no echo of help, no message of hope? Send they no thrill through the being? Can we not find in them food for fairer dreams? And high-built dreams oft end in living things!



**mooth and level is the  
road of life if only our  
burdens are borne in  
love.**



## VI

**I**AN MACLAREN tells somewhere a sweet story of his native Scotland—that while sauntering along a country lane one hot afternoon, he met a bonnie wee lass, all humped up and red, and puffing with the weight of a chubby laddie she was carrying.

“Isn’t he too heavy for you?” asked the dominie.

“He’s not hivvy, sir,” came the reply, with a smile of loving pride; “he’s ma brither!”

How vastly different this old world might be if more of us could or would make brothers of our burdens! Love is the greatest of all lighteners, and that which is borne lovingly seldom weighs sorely. Yet the lanes of labor are crowded with men and women who bend and sigh, and grow weary apace, because they are carrying strangers! To them the day’s task is only monotonous or galling—there is nothing companionable or brotherly about it. In this spirit too often is it borne. How much happier might the heart be, how much more willing the hands, if place were more commonly given to

the great thought that even in the humblest and least-seen achievement is hidden a part needed in developing this divinest of dramas! Who, feeling the truth of this within, might not say of the meanest task:

“It’s not hivvy, sir; it’s ma brither!”

No man’s Scotland is all abloom with heather. In the vales are thickets, and up in the hills, barren and jagged precipices threaten dire things. Times come, I know, when even the loads we carry lovingly, do bear down on us somewhat, and when the lane seems longer than we can traverse. But I know, too—and I love to feel that the world is full of those who are with me in this—that the brightest morning is that which ends a night of unrivaled darkness; that the green of spring never again glows with quite the same charm as in that first blade which pushes upward to the light through the brown blanket of dead leaves. And beyond this, from the record of the years that have been, I know that they who hope to leave this place better for having lived in it, must learn to bear patiently, if not in love, what is here their portion.

It is only in feeling, in knowing that our part, however small, is essential to the final betterment of things that we can make it truly



so. It is only through a brother's love for that which is given us to carry here that we can have peace and can smile as we go along. The world around may see little and know less, but what does that matter. There is One who does know all, and who measures justly; whose portioning should never weigh heavily—for He's ma Brither!





**ailure is often that  
morning hour of dark-  
ness which proceeds  
the dawning of the  
day of Success.**



## VII

**H**EAVEN is probably a place for those who have failed on earth."

There is a strange sound about this, is there not? But let us stop and consider. What is failure? Had you and I been one of that jeering throng that crowded the way to Calvary, we had answered by pointing at the Christ, pale, bleeding, and burdened. Had we been near when a neglected beggar died in a little town of Spain on May 20, 1506, we might have said Columbus. If, perchance, we had strayed into Rouen one day centuries back, and there seen a saint-faced woman burning to death, we would have made reply—Joan of Arc. Again, if in the winter of 1777 we had wandered into a camp of starved soldiers, freezing in a Pennsylvania valley, we could scarce have hesitated saying, "The cause to which these wretches are clinging." These were failures—lives thrown away, in the estimation of their contemporaries among men. But what of Christianity; what of the Americas; of the one woman who has place among the

greatest; of our own Government? Do you count them failures?

And do you wonder that we have such sayings as "Success lies in failure" and "Victory is in defeat?" Perhaps a fuller knowledge of the doings of men in the long line of years that stretch between us and the earlier ages, might remove that wonder and leave us staring in amazement at him who would dare refute such truths. Yet, knowing all this from the actual records of sixty centuries, we still set our standards in fields wholly material and we still strive toward them, not counting the cost; with an eye only for the possible gain. We do it because the world calls this success. We take the world at its word, without often stopping to think of, or for, our own selves. And the truth is, that success is not wealth—save of good traits and character. It is not lands and moneys and fine raiment. It never was, and furthermore, it never can be. Nor is it power, position or prestige. Nine out of ten times it is apparent failure, and the tenth time it rises from apparent failure. Nine out of ten times the world brands it as uselessness, or fanaticism, or diseased mentality. But the world does not know!

It depends chiefly whether you are working for the world's praise or the world's

good, how its commendation or its condemnation is given. But if you will work for the praise of that inner spirit which, for lack of a better name, we call conscience, no pain shall be felt at what the world does or says. In truth, if you have a high and good purpose and honestly try to attain it, you must apparently fail in some measure, because all strength is founded on unseen supports, and the highest tower is that whose base extends the farthest under ground. But mere failure should be the last thing to daunt you. Remember how the oyster mends its wounded shell—with pearl!







**he whole universe is  
a poem, whose pon-  
derous rhythm and  
majestic metre be-  
speak the author-  
ship of God.**



## VIII

ONE Wednesday afternoon back in the baby days of the last century, three poets who were friends met together, as was their weekly custom. Before parting, each agreed to write a sonnet on "The Grasshopper," and to read it the following Wednesday. How would you like to have been there when John Keats and Percy Shelley and Leigh Hunt—for they were the friends—read each his fourteen lines! How would you like to have heard Keats repeat that first line of his sonnet—those immortal seven words:

"The poetry of earth is never dead."

Sometimes comes the wonder if we realize, when we read the songs of the poets, that around us on every side, and well within our reach if only we put out our hearts, are the very causes for these outbursts of soul! We wander away charmed by the big and the showy, and it seldom occurs to us that in so small and common a creation as the grasshopper is hidden great beauty. We forget that in the crowning of common things we make monarchs.

For him who can find in some tiny flower or bird, food for a day's study and a week's

thought, is opened a field of happiness whose confines are well-nigh limitless. He may trace the whole course of time in the study of one daisy, or read the history of the ages in a bit of broken stone. It is not always on the surface, neither is gold nor the diamond, but it is there if one will seek. The world of nature is a great book, open to every one who will turn its pages, and within that book is writ so much of beauty and wonder and helpfulness that the reader is sure to forget the little pains and cares that slip almost daily into life.

Indeed, "the poetry of earth is never dead." To-day it sleeps under the brown and withered leaves, its sighing bringing to us new and deeper thoughts; to-morrow it is echoed in the crystal chorus of a thousand birds, or nestles in the color and fragrance of a field of bloom. To-night it sways us with its thunderous chansons; at morning it pours over earth a flood of golden hopes. Now it is an epic, in the bended figure of one of the world's unfortunates; again, a sonnet in the sweet grace of a woman, or a rippling ballad in the laugh of a fair child. All the poems written of men are but translations of nature, and to each of us is the possibility of reading them in the original, if we but will.



**riendship is one of  
the few words of earth  
that will be compre=  
hended of souls in  
the hereafter.**



## IX

THE nights are nearing when shooting stars scratch the purple skies. Across the darkened dome the tramps of heaven hurry, blazing an instant, then going out forever. A moment they charm, but even the memory is quickly gone, and again we turn to those far-set specks of light which, from the earliest times, have been as now. Small though they be, and infinitesimal amid the countless legions, we know where to find them each clear night, and they never disappoint us. Through long watches of cloud curtaining we may still be sure of them—sure that when the veil is at length dissolved, we shall see our friends in their old places.

Friend—what a word! Blessed is he who can boast one, in the full meaning. Who has two is rich beyond words, and more than that marks one truly loved of the Maker. There may be a score of friendly acquaintances, but my “friend” is as different from these as is the fixed star from the meteor. My “friend” is that one who came into my life as did the stars, without any great flashing of lights; whose place seems

as truly foreordained as the dwellings of those distant beacons. My "friend" is constant, like that high star, and though distance and days come between us, as do clouds between it and me, I know my friend is still there, shining with the same dear, steady light, and when the distance and days are melted away I shall find it so.

My "friend" is the one before whom I need not fear to unfold all that I am. That one is the first to appreciate the good; the last to leave me on account of the evil. In short, my "friend" is some part of my own self, which after many or few years, I have met again, purified and made better by the stewardship exercised over it.

My "friend" is a great part of the true wealth open to every life which will allow itself to be truly unfolded. For each note given forth from the heart's harp-strings finds an answering note somewhere, and if that note be burdened only with the best melody, it shall some day come back finely blended with a note of friendship. We cannot "make" friends. We cannot often "choose" them. In that same place where is put into one heart the torch that is sometime to light the candle of another, all true friendships are planned, and into our human care is entrusted only the building—and the joy!





**hat our hearts may be  
unfeignedly thankful,  
and that we show forth  
our praise not only with  
our lips, but in our  
lives.**

*(Book of Common Prayer.)*



## X

**T**O-DAY our thoughts turn to a lone rock on the New England coast. Standing beside that milestone in the path of the progress of men and nations, and looking back across the years that have come and gone since the Pilgrims, we face the miracle of the ages. For on that scant foundation has been builded the best of the temples of Time—a free government without a parallel in history. The promise of one bleak day is a thousand-fold fulfilled. In company with a host of heroes whose like has seldom been, they sleep in peace who cast to the winds from that barren spot the seeds of what has come to pass. And in peace with a wondering world, we reap the harvest. And in thankfulness.

Is it too much, as we bend before the Maker of Nations, to dwell awhile on the struggles of those earlier years, yet remembering how an unseen hand seemed ever to guide aright, and to guard? Shall we forget the dangers, suffering and deaths which were borne that just principles might live, and high standards have their

being and flourish? And as we behold the line of phantom figures that rise from out the mist, they seem to live again in all the vigor and strength of their first existence.

They are not dead; they stand arrayed  
In robes aglow with what is good and true.  
Theirs is the noblest emblem Time has made—  
The red of martyrdom, the white of peace,  
And of God's everlasting dome, the blue.

When we come back to the present, and rise to the duties that are, let it be with more strength to strive—not for the seen greatness, since that fades, but for those higher ends that serve God and man alike. We have kept well the trust, yet sometimes we have faltered. Much that they would and we might have done, remains undone to-day. It is not alone, or enough for us to ask forgiveness. It is also our duty, and our first duty, to grasp what has gone wrong and right it now. Like them we are human, but God never asks more than man can give. They laid the foundation and left the structure to our rearing and our care.

They held to the hand rail of Heaven while they set the stones. Did they wrong? Then let us likewise. Let us temper progress with high purpose. Let us alloy gain with good and firmness with faith. Let us blend with all labor,

love. Then when our children's children kneel  
as we kneel to-day, it shall be in a better, a  
nobler, and a more glorious land. Amen!











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